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WASHINGTON WINDOW: ASSIGN COVERT AID TO THE PENTAGON?
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WASHINGTON

The CIA has been much abused in recent years for its role in providing covert military aid to various foreign governments or factions. Sen. Malcolm Wallop is proposing to spare the agency by giving the job to the Pentagon.

The Wyoming Republican offered the idea during recent debate on the defense authorization bill, saying the Pentagon -- not the CIA -- has the expertise needed to hand out military aid in a manner to make it truly effective.

Wallop did not press for a vote on his amendment, which was fortunate since the idea is fraught with difficulties, as indicated by the response from some of Wallop's colleagues.

It was agreed, however, that the idea would be give due consideration by the Senate Intelligence and Armed Services committees.

Wallop said the military and paramilitary aid provided by the CIA to various foreign groups has often proven to be less effective than it should have been -- "In other words, our side has lost."

"It does precious little good to send hundreds of millions of dollars of equipment unless it is done according to proper military criteria with certain military expertise," Wallop told his colleagues.

Wallop also noted the domestic and international furor that develops when it is revealed "that this or that liberation movement is assisted by the CIA."

His idea is to have specially trained U.S. military personnel, operating in small teams, "go in and help organize and assist and develop deterrent resistance to all kinds of Soviet military entanglements in various countries around the world."

It was unclear from Wallop's remarks why he thinks there would be less furor at the disclosure that U.S. military men, presumably in uniform, were operating secretly or openly in some foreign country.

Such missions clearly would constitute a degree of U.S. military intervention in foreign conflicts. Critics could reasonably ask where the line would be drawn between a few small "teams" of advisers and expanded forces that could become a significant factor in the fighting.

World opinion aside, many members of Congress could be expected to loudly oppose the assignment of U.S. soldiers to foreign conflicts. Even in El Salvador, where the United States is openly and formally aiding the government, Congress has been obsessed with holding to a limit of 55 U.S. military advisers and keeping them well out of the actual fighting.

Wallop said the CIA does not particularly want the job of providing covert aid to foreign military forces, but it is doubtful the Pentagon would be much more enthusiastic about taking on the task and all the pitfalls involved therein.

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Chairman Dave Durenberger, R-Minn., of the Senate Intelligence Committee, responding to Wallop's proposal, said the president already has the authority to designate some agency other than the CIA to be responsible for "special activities" such as covert aid, but has never found the need to do so.

Chairman Barry Goldwater, R-Ariz., of the Senate Armed Services Committee also seems inclined to leave it up to the president. He told Wallop the whole issue was not one that "should or could be intelligently decided in hearings before a legislative body."

Goldwater, who headed the Intelligence Committee in the last Congress, also commented on the CIA's performance, saying their work in Asia deserves "nothing but the highest compliments."

"On the other hand, the way they have balled up things down in Central America, I can understand (Wallop's) feelings," Goldwater said.